

Development of a Professional Identity for the Child Care Worker*

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ABSTRACT: The movement toward professionalization of the child care field confronts serious and complex problems of conceptualization and practical organization of roles, programs, and personnel. This article describes and analyzes these issues in the context of current practice and the emerging professionalization of the field.

KEY WORDS: professionalization of day and residential child and youth care work; residential group care for children and youth; youthwork; youth development.

Increased recognition of the importance of direct child care practitioners in day and residential settings has been accompanied in recent years by a movement for professionalization. A variety of models for professionalization has been offered by, for example, Barnes and Kelman [1:7-30] Klein, [3:56-60] Rieger and Devries, [9:150-158] and Zigler [11:71-74]. However, too little systematic attention has been given to the implications of this movement for the child care field and the broader field of children's services. Nor has there been detailed consideration of the form of professionalization that would best serve children's needs or of the means of achieving it. These are the issues this paper addresses.

Why Professionalization?

Although the desirability of professionalization has been accepted by many child care workers and others interested in the field, it is opposed by some child care workers with traditional orientations, by new careerists who advocate nonprofessional role models in the human services, [2] and by some members of allied disciplines who view child care as subservient to their own professional expertise and authority.

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[7:15-19, 8:25-26] The European and French Canadian *educateur* models and other approaches cited by those who support professionalization [1:7-30; 4:125-133; 5:155-190; 9:150-158] are often criticized by those who are opposed, or who favor professionalization within the context of existing disciplines. [7:15-19; 8:25-26; 10:130-132]

The impetus toward professionalization has emerged from a variety of circumstances, among them the low current status of the field and the associated difficult working conditions, low pay, limited opportunities for promotion, and the like. But these are not the only factors, and perhaps not the primary ones. If they were, the pressure for unionization would be stronger than it is and might overshadow professional aspirations. It is instructive to note that two of the allied fields often viewed as professional—teaching and social work—seem more oriented toward unionization than is child care.

Thus, the professional movement in child care is also closely associated with such concerns as quality of care, more autonomy of practice, and differentiation of the child care function from other services as a distinct, potent helping modality. Most advocates probably also view it as an attempt to establish the child care generalist as the broad-based specialist in the use of the group living situation to promote growth.

At the same time, the emerging professional child care worker is often envisioned as the coordinator of the special services of a variety of other professionals. By virtue of his position in the ongoing life of the child, the child care worker seems best situated to maintain the integrity of the child and his development in the face of the myriad demands that may be made by specialists concerned primarily with the child's education, therapy, health, religious and cultural growth, etc. Ideally, he also works closely with the youngster's parents, helping them to accept greater responsibility in the parent-child relationship. Given the requisite skill and authority, the child care worker's contribution can be to orchestrate these resources, usually in the context of ongoing group living, in the service of the child. He is the child's advocate in the best sense of the term, as well as a professional advocate in wider circles for the interests of children in general.

This seems to be the substance of the movement for professionalization. The necessary concomitants—higher salaries, better training, the career ladder, and the like—can be justified in the context of models of practice based on this concept of the function of child care.

Autonomy or Affiliation?

Some believe that the role can best be implemented in the context of an existing discipline such as social work, special education, or psychiatric nursing. [6:62-81] Arguments for a separate identity are largely based on

two major premises: 1) that child care work must draw on and integrate selected insights from all these fields and others in new ways, and 2) that existing traditions, status patterns, and vested interests within these disciplines militate against development of the autonomy and power needed by child care personnel. This does not imply any violation of the appropriate prerogatives of other professions, nor minimize their contributions. Rather, it frees them from extraneous tasks, so that in serving children, they can concentrate in their own areas of expertise.

Arenas of Child Care Practice

Professional aspirations for child care also envision that organization and agencies—bureaucratic settings—will continue to be the primary arena in which child care workers operate. Thus, it would not be a profession in which private practice, established and governed largely by the practitioner, is the norm, as in fields like medicine and law. Child care workers would take their place beside (rather than subservient to) social workers, educators, nurses and other specialists whose professional autonomy is exercised within the limits of organizational contexts. Where appropriate, child care personnel would compose the supervisory and administrative hierarchy, just as nurses do in hospital nursing services, educators in schools, and social workers in family service and other agencies.

This implies vast differences from predominantly “private practice” professions in such matters as social control, responsibility, public expectations, etc., and these differences must be understood if the field is to progress rationally and effectively. The key issue for child care workers is not autonomy from the necessary demands of the organizational structures within which they function, but differentiation, that is, having an area in which their primacy and expertise are recognized and accepted. This also provides a power base from which child care professionals can influence overall program development.

Feasibility

Assuming wide agreement that professionalization is desirable and sufficient consensus on what it entails to permit a unified effort, the field must still confront issues of feasibility. Frequently there are economic objections based on the idea that substituting professional-level salaries and working conditions for subprofessional ones must inflate costs. More sophisticated analyses suggest that redeployment of staff resources, reduced staff turnover rates, and possible shortened residence periods for many clients might make program models based on professional child

care personnel less expensive than traditional ones. However, on the basis of his recent experience in establishing an educateur-type program in New Hampshire, F. Herbert Barnes has concluded that expectations of lower costs may not be realistic (personal communication, 1974). The question of economic feasibility must be regarded as open.

Feasibility must also be viewed in terms of professional vested interests and power patterns existing in the field. Professional child care will not find itself welcomed into most programs spawned on existing traditions. Among its strongest allies in the attempt to achieve a leadership role will be 1) evidence of economic feasibility, and 2) its ability to spearhead the conversion of programs now widely recognized as ineffective into efficient, effective agents of child and adolescent development. In this connection, careful evaluation of a variety of programs is essential.

Since techniques available for evaluation based on "hard data" are still comparatively primitive and time-consuming, evidence of construct validity in the form of detailed, conceptually based program descriptions is also needed to help convince both allied professionals and lay decision makers of the efficacy of programs based on professional child care. Clearly stated, operationally defined goals for child care programs are essential. The process of using these conceptual tools and other resources to implement the projected role in a wide range of practice settings remains to be developed.

Issues Internal to the Child Care Field

Most of the issues cited in the foregoing are those on which advocates of professional child care can agree; the opposition, if any, comes from outside. The jurisdictional question—whether the field should be autonomous or part of another discipline—is largely one of means rather than ends, since the projected role of child care is similar either way.

The tougher questions, still to be confronted, are internal to the child care field itself, and reflect frequently unrecognized discrepancies in how the concept of professionalization is understood. Such formal attributes of a profession as a recognized educational credentialing process, a systematic body of specialized knowledge, legitimated professional autonomy, and a service orientation and code of ethics provide useful reference points, but they need to be anchored specifically to the evolution and aspirations of the child care field.

Present Practitioners

All new professions enter the scene with a cadre of preprofessional practitioners. They are needed to continue to provide services in the transitional period before enough qualified professionals become avail-

able, and they have a legitimate claim based on the stakes they have developed in their own careers as well. The most advanced are often instrumental in establishing the new profession; others may upgrade their knowledge and work as the profession becomes recognized. The legitimacy of such practitioners is recognized through so-called “grandfather clauses” included in new certification and licensing laws, membership requirements for professional associations, etc. Thus, they are made eligible to continue to practice even though they lack the formal credentials to be required of newcomers to the field.

The role of existing preprofessional practitioners in child care is of particular significance at the present stage. A large majority of child care positions are occupied by essentially untrained personnel. Many do not have college backgrounds; a significant number have not been graduated from high school. Although they frequently have had long experience in child care positions, most have had only haphazard inservice training, or none at all. Generally, little or nothing beyond routine custodial tasks is expected of them. Most do not seem to see themselves as professionals or to aspire to professional status, although many are dedicated to child care as a career. Their job performance varies from brutal and abusive to highly effective—although professionally undisciplined—work with youngsters.

Recently the field has had an inflowing of young persons who, while not professionals in child care, are frequently on the way to professional careers in allied fields. They have included conscientious objectors to the draft, Peace Corps returnees, and others seeking human service opportunities. Increasingly, applicants for child care positions are college graduates, often newly trained teachers or other human service professionals who cannot find employment in their own fields. Many become frustrated with the child care field and soon leave for positions in related areas.

It would be impossible to replace these two groups with professionals overnight, even if this were the objective. Most of the traditional workers will remain, pending natural attrition. The younger workers trained in allied disciplines represent a valuable resource that can be tapped if the field moves quickly enough. It must devise and establish training programs and practice conditions that will stimulate many of these workers to develop their professional identities within the child care discipline.

Role Differentiation and Levels of Function

A key question concerns what a profession encompassing this conglomerate of current child care workers will look like. It seems necessary to think in terms of a systematic pattern of differentiated subfunc-

tions to be performed by personnel with credentials on different levels. The nursing model is instructive here, with its differentiation among, for example, registered nurses, practical nurses and nurse's aides. The relatively recent movement toward developing roles for paramedical personnel to assist physicians with routine situations is expected to enhance rather than dilute the contribution of the medical profession. Roles are also being developed for paralegal personnel to assist lawyers, for lay assistants to perform some of the traditional functions of the clergy, and for paraprofessional aides in teaching and other human services. These approaches suggest that building in roles at various levels need not dilute the professionalism of the child care field. Of course, the flexibility of some disciplines, including child care, in this regard is somewhat limited by the importance of interpersonal relationship, process and continuity. The work is not simply a series of disparate functions that can be divided among a variety of practitioners. Therefore, planning for effective role differentiation presents a special challenge requiring creativity and initiative.

Development along these lines would be closely attuned to the conception of a career ladder. It would provide options for personnel to continue with a clearly defined role at one level or to acquire more specialized training for advancement to the next. Child care workers in traditional agencies could be encompassed by the new profession even though they might not be functioning as full professionals. Those taking leadership roles in the development of the profession would gravitate to appropriate settings, and, in so doing, expand or create opportunities for those to follow. Meanwhile, youngsters would continue to be served in existing service structures, but appropriate alternatives would become increasingly available.

It seems clear, however, that the child care field will not be able to establish professional credibility or intellectual legitimacy with entry-level practitioners who have only associate degrees in child care or higher degrees in other fields. Yet these are the beginning child care practitioners of today. One question to be faced is the role of the advanced, professional child care degree—presumably the master's. There is growing accord that the master's degree should be the basic professional credential. But should it connote the preparation of a competent practitioner, like the social work or teaching master's? Or should it be designed to prepare supervisors—leaders who can organize and upgrade the less-qualified practitioners, often uncommitted to child care careers, who now compose most of the field? What are the implications of these alternatives in terms of job opportunities and the overall development of the profession? In addition, since so few programs are available that offer master's degrees in child care, will other means of entry into the field as a full professional be provided during the period

of transition? If so, what will they be, and what are the implications of this for the development of the field?

Perhaps more fundamentally, is the full-fledged professional child care worker to be conceived of as primarily a direct practitioner or as a supervisor and administrator? At present, those with advanced training in the field usually hold supervisory or other positions at least one step removed from direct care. It is hard to envision a significant change in this pattern except, perhaps, over a long period. Therefore, if professional standards comparable with those in other fields are established, few direct practitioners will qualify for full professional status.

This follows in somewhat exaggerated form the model of what might be called the "bureaucratic professions," such as social work and teaching, where greater training, experience and expertise tend to lead to positions with greater status that are generally removed from direct service. In contrast, for example, physicians recognized as outstanding continue to treat patients; medical administration is usually handled by less well-known colleagues, who tend to be paid less as well, or by lay administrators. A great teacher—below the college level—is likely to become a principal; a great physician is likely to work directly with the most unusual and difficult cases in his field, probably observed and assisted by younger colleagues learning from his expertise. The direction we choose to follow in child care, and the economic and other consequences of this choice, represent one of the most important factors in planning for professional development.

Format of the Direct Care Role

The model of child care to be established as the norm, somewhat different from the question of levels, is also still largely undefined. However, the outlines of what may become major areas of contention among child care professionals are beginning to emerge. For example, should the educateur model or the Re-ED model be followed? Should the emphasis be on behavior modification or on psychodynamics? Should the child care specialist be a member of the treatment team, its coordinator, or the developer of a new, more appropriate approach to replace the classical team concept originally developed for child guidance clinics?

It is important to debate these issues within the profession. The decisions made may vary for different workers and in different settings. A traditional team approach may be sound in a treatment situation where the child care worker's function is largely diagnostic or in a

medical setting where child care may be peripheral to the program, but it may make no sense at all in a residential facility for dependent and neglected children. A more pressing need, however, is for the development of a conceptualization of the field that gets beneath specific issues of technique and setting to define the generic elements that legitimate child care's claim to professional sanction.

Day Care Workers and Professional Boundaries

One question this will force the field to confront concerns the role of day care workers in preschool settings in the child care profession. Are they in, are they out, or are they somehow peripheral to child care and one or two other disciplines? In many states, licensing and certification requirements tend to classify them as educators, thus making it difficult to integrate them with the overall child care field. Perhaps ironically, it is precisely because most other child care workers have not been subject to state or other professional certification requirements that there now seems to be such a promising opportunity to build the profession. But the question of boundaries has to be confronted, and perhaps the most important such issue involves the place of day care. If it is to be part of the field, how can its identity in this framework be developed?

Implementation

Finally, it is important for the field to understand the implications of professionalization for existing and projected programs and to plan for implementation. The best way to implement a professional model will depend partly on the decision as to which should come first—the professionalization of child care or the development of agency structures and programs in which professional child care makes sense.

Barnes and Kelman [1:7-30] have detailed their conception of the role of the child care milieu professional, around which they would build residential group care and treatment programs. Whittaker [10: 130-132] takes the contrasting position that the programs should be conceptualized first, as a framework within which more effective roles for child care can be developed. This debate has a bearing on the sources of needed change.

Whittaker's position suggests that the field look primarily to program developers and other agency leadership for the creation of more effective program models and their implementation. I assume he would argue that only in this way can proponents of change muster the power and influence needed to succeed, and only in this way can the overall

integrity of the emerging program be assured. Barnes and Kelman, on the other hand, would probably hold that existing agency leadership has largely committed itself to dysfunctional program models and would, therefore, be unable to lead in making fundamental change. The establishment of a cadre of child care professionals in something akin to the educator mold, on the other hand, would force agencies to accommodate to more effective processes or to lose out to those that did.

These two views are a generic reflection of the dilemma that confronts all concerned with the establishment of a viable child care profession and training programs for child care professionals. The refrain is a familiar one. Even if child care personnel are trained at a professional level, they will have little opportunity to obtain commensurate career positions. Too often, their credentials will not be “portable” or widely accepted, as are those of such colleagues as the M.S.W., the Ph.D. psychologists, the psychiatrist, or teachers and nurses, and their upward mobility will be limited. If, however, we start by creating meaningful, professional-level child care positions, there will be too few qualified candidates to be recruited for them—and those who are qualified will be equally handicapped in terms of professional mobility in child care.

To some extent, it is important to do both jobs at once—to produce trained, professional personnel and to provide commensurate opportunities for them. Initiatives for change must be taken by agencies and by child care professionals alike. Such efforts have not, however, succeeded on a broad scale to date, although there is some loosening of the barriers. The critical question is, how can needed change, both within and beyond the child care field, be stimulated to move more quickly in a field that has proved so inflexible and resistant to change?

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